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Chinese Protestant Reactions to the Zhejiang 'Three Rectifications, One Demolition' Campaign

Abstract

This paper analyses the wider effects of church demolitions and cross removals in Zhejiang on another location within the Huadong region. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2014 and 2015, this paper argues that the demolition of churches and church crosses is a potential catalyst for millenarian beliefs within popular Christianity. Much of the research on millenarianism has focused on specific movements. However, this paper utilises the concept of millenarianism as a “body of underground ideas and thought which circulates in a community” and argues that the Zhejiang events have heightened millenarian beliefs within the Huanghaicheng Protestant community and resulted in an interpretation of these events as indicating that the “Last Days” are imminent. This perception has been facilitated by other “signs.” This paper furthers our understanding of the potential impact which political campaigns can have on popular Christianity and what resources individual believers draw on for making sense of them.

Key terms: millenarianism, Huadong, popular Christianity, ‘Three Rectifications, One Demolition’ Campaign, Zhejiang

Introduction

The widely-reported church demolitions and cross removals which took place from 2014 to 2016 in Zhejiang were part of a three-year provincial “Three Rectifications, One Demolition Campaign”¹ (*Sangai yichai xingdong* 三改一拆行动 – hereafter referred to as “the Campaign”) the aim of which was to secure (rectify) unsafe buildings and remove (demolish) old and illegal buildings so as to encourage economic growth, and improve the urban landscape – according to official explanations in a notice drafted in 2013 (People’s Government of Zhejiang Province 2013).²

The notice was first implemented on the first of January, 2014, when a church in rural Hangzhou, Zhejiang received an order from the local government to remove the cross from the top of its roof. This event was followed by a number of church demolitions across the province (some with prior warning, some without) as well as the forced removal of crosses from the tops of church buildings (again, some with prior notice, others without) throughout 2014, 2015 and into 2016. According to my own fieldwork in the summer of 2014, while crosses were not removed from churches in the centre of Wenzhou, some churches³ were instructed not to turn on the lights of their crosses at night so as to remove their visibility from the sky-line.⁴ Reports in the first half of 2016, estimated that between 1,200 and 1,700 crosses had been removed from churches (Phillips 2016; Johnson 2016). Reports in 2015 put the number of church demolitions at between 35 and 50 (UCA News 2015b), although these figures are difficult to verify. In April, 2014 the Sanjiang Church (*Sanjiang jiaotang* 三江教堂) complex just outside Wenzhou was demolished (Phillips 2014b). The sheer size of the original building, coupled with the fact that it was a Three-Self-affiliated congregation attracted a great deal of attention both internationally and within China and, in some ways, became a symbol of the Campaign.⁵

¹ The full official title of the campaign is “Rectify and demolish illegal buildings in old residential areas, old industrial areas and in urban villages” (Jiu zhuzhaiqu, jiu changqu, chengzhongcun gaizao he chaichu weifa jianzhu 旧住宅区、旧厂区、城中村改造和拆除违法建筑).

² For a partial English translation see China Aid Association (2014).

³ I cannot verify that this requirement was placed on all churches in the centre of Wenzhou.

⁴ This has been referred to by some journalists as the “de-Christianisation” of the skyline (see Tracy 2014).

⁵ This is not the first time churches have been demolished in the reform era as part of a state-initiated campaign. Chan (2016) cites specific examples of church buildings which were demolished in the 1990s and early 2000s. Other estimates suggest that up to 1,500 Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as Daoist and Buddhist temples were demolished (sometimes with dynamite) during the year 2000 (Grace 2001). Many of the Christian churches demolished during that particular “crackdown” were “unregistered” and therefore not affiliated with either the Catholic or Protestant ‘patriotic organisations.’ Chow (2016) analyses the demolition of a Seventh-

Besides church demolitions and cross removals, Christians were detained or arrested for either criticising state actions, staging protests or trying to prevent officials from demolishing church buildings or removing church crosses (Chan 2016). Some sources estimate that over one hundred Christians have been detained or arrested in Zhejiang since the commencement of the Campaign (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2015). Other sources claim figures as high as 1,300 (Zylstra 2015). In 2014, Pastor Huang Yizi 黄益梓 was detained for disturbing social order (Phillips 2014a).⁶ Pastor Bao Guohua 包国华 and his wife Xing Wenxiang 邢文香, were detained in August 2015, for financial crimes (BBC 2015). They had previously resisted attempts to remove church crosses (Wong 2016).⁷ Christian writer, Zan Aizong 詹爱宗, was detained briefly in November 2015 after writing about the cross removals (Mai 2015). The human rights lawyer, Zhang Kai 张凯, was detained a number of times for offering legal support to churches in Zhejiang (Connor 2016; Caballero 2017). In July, 2015, the Zhejiang Christian Council sent an open letter⁸ to the Zhejiang Ethnic and Religious Affairs Administration criticising the Campaign. The Council's seal was subsequently seized, preventing the Council from conducting some official work and ensuring that it was unable to draft further letters (UCA News 2015a; Zeng 2015).⁹ Further open letters of protest were sent to the government by churches in various parts of the province during the autumn of 2015 (see Ying 2016:53) but to no effect. While the arrest of Christians was not officially part of the Campaign, it has had far-reaching consequences.

It is not my aim in this paper to analyse responses to the church demolitions of Christians in Zhejiang but I think it is worth briefly introducing what I observed from visits to churches in several locations in Zhejiang in the summer of 2014.¹⁰ In places I visited in Zhejiang, there

Day Adventist Church in Zhenjiang (Zhejiang) in May, 2012. Little has been reported about the demolition of temples and shrines (as opposed to churches), which were also supposed to be included in the 2014-2016 Campaign. Officials have claimed that Buddhist temples have been demolished as well (Phillips 2014c) but there are no reports detailing the demolition of temples or shrines.

⁶ He was subsequently sentenced to one year in prison (Yu 2015).

⁷ In February, 2016, they were sentenced to fourteen and twelve years, respectively.

⁸ For a full translation of this letter, see China Change (2015).

⁹ The *Global Times*, an official newspaper, reiterated in September that the demolitions and removal of crosses were entirely legal and accused both Christians and the foreign media of "twisting facts" (Global Times 2015).

¹⁰ I conducted fieldwork in Taizhou and Wenzhou (both city districts and counties) and talked with and interviewed church leaders and lay believers. I also visited the former Sanjiang Church site which by that point had already been entirely turfed over. For the purposes of ensuring the anonymity of particular congregations and individuals, I have not provided details of specific churches or people. It should be noted that some of the churches I visited have since had their crosses removed by the local state.

was a general nervousness about the Campaign. In one church I visited, in reference to the local authorities, a group of church workers said, “We don’t know when they will come. It could be today. We just have to trust the Lord.” In another church, an elderly church worker said that he was feeling scared and appeared quite visibly shaken. There were also ongoing discussions in some congregations about which churches might be targeted next for cross removal. These discussions centred on deciding which churches stood out in particular parts of whatever city or county due to their size or influence and many of these churches were holding prayer meetings about the Campaign.

Fear was not the only reaction to the Campaign. One particular ‘Boss Christian,’ claimed that his church could have done more to improve their relationship with the local officials and that they had not always handled affairs with the local state very well. I was also struck by the view which was often put forward that the Campaign had been launched for political reasons, and therefore the state had a clear rationale in launching it, even if people did not agree with the actual church demolitions and cross removals. Some church workers, especially those in senior positions, had either read or had discussed the main contents of the official document outlining the Campaign. People certainly seemed well informed about what was happening to churches and congregations across the province (although I am sure that there was some guesswork as to what was going on in other parts of the province).

Understandably, the church demolitions, removal of crosses and arrests in Zhejiang received considerable attention both within China and in the Western media. Much of the analysis on the situation in Zhejiang has tried to determine why the Campaign was carried out, whether the central state tacitly approved the actions and if this was the first step in a campaign which would be extended to other provinces.¹¹ It is obviously important to analyse these events to facilitate our understanding of church-state interactions at the local level and to illuminate what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping will tolerate in terms of local state actions involving religious organisations. In this paper, however, I will not attempt to answer these questions but will discuss the wider effects of the Campaign in Zhejiang on another location within the Huadong region: Huanghaicheng.¹² The official line regarding the Campaign is that churches which were demolished were “illegal buildings”

¹¹ For early analyses see ChinaSource Team (2014) and Guo (2014). For an in-depth analysis of the Campaign in Wenzhou, see Ying (2016) and Shun (2016) who analyses the Campaign in relation to Catholic churches. See also Cao (2017) for a critical analysis of approaching the Campaign in terms of church-state interactions.

¹² Pseudonym.

(China Daily 2014). However, it has been widely perceived as selective targeting of Protestant and Catholic churches. This perception of the Campaign, therefore, has the potential to cause problems for the state in the long term not only in Zhejiang but throughout the eastern coastal provinces and possibly beyond. One of the potential problems which the state will have to deal with is the “fall-out” of the Campaign on the Protestant population.

Based on interviews, oral accounts and participant observation in Huanghaicheng (Shandong), this paper argues that the demolition of churches and church crosses is a potential *catalyst* for millenarian beliefs within ‘popular Christianity.’¹³ Much of the research on millenarianism has focused on specific religious *movements* that expect “imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation” (Talmon 1966:159 and Cohn 1962). However, I will utilise the concept of millenarianism in this paper as employed by Hamilton (2001:13) who argues that these elements of millenarianism can take the form of a “body of underground ideas and thought which circulates in a community” rather than as a specific movement *per se*. This paper argues that the Zhejiang events have resulted in many Protestant Christians in Huanghaicheng interpreting the cross removals and arrest of Christians as “persecution” and indicative that the “Last Days” (*zuihoude rizi* 最后的日子 or *mori* 末日) are imminent as they feel a growing sense of crisis. Further, this perception has been facilitated by other “signs” such as environmental degradation and state support of other religious traditions as a counter against Protestantism which suggest that the time for a “New Heaven and a New Earth” (*xintian xindi* 新天新地) is pressing. In addition, the paper will argue that the state’s approach to managing religion emphasises dealing with specific groups but largely ignores the potential for a “body of underground ideas” which can be catalysed by external events. This paper will further our understanding of the potential impact which political campaigns can have on popular Christianity and what religious resources individual believers draw on for making sense of them. We turn now to some conceptual considerations on millenarianism. Having established a conceptual approach, the paper will then briefly introduce Huanghaicheng for the sake of context and then move on to an analysis of the effects of the events in Zhejiang on popular Christianity in Huanghaicheng.

¹³ I use the term “popular Christianity” as Christian belief and practice at the grassroots, “in which religious identities, borders and authority are not concrete and absolute, but often fluid and subject to negotiation” (Raj and Dempsey 2002:1-2).

Conceptual considerations

Millenarianism is a set of beliefs centred on the idea of an impending transformation of the world and this set of beliefs has a rationale which appears clear and consistent to adherents. However, in many cases millenarians do not identify themselves as millenarian and we do not need to – or even perhaps arguably should not – expect that the beliefs of millenarians are entirely coherent or consistent. While millenarian beliefs are found across a wide range of religious traditions, various forms of Christianity have been most commonly associated with the term, and it is widely accepted that early Christianity was a millenarian movement (Kyle 1998:23). Based on the pioneering studies of Cohn (1962) and Talmon (1966) the classic definition of millenarianism which continues to be utilised by scholars researching religious groups and movements today is: “religious movements that expect *imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective* salvation” (Talmon 1966:159). Scholars have noted that some millenarian movements have further characteristics,¹⁴ but the elements outlined here are common across millenarian groups throughout history. We will briefly unpack this definition before turning to the question of whether this can only be applied to an identifiable group or movement.

History, according to millenarianists, is pre-determined and the end of it – the “Last Days” – is marked by signs which can take the form of terrible tribulations or a “sense of deepening crisis” (Talmon 1966:167). Signs can also take the form of the threat of or the reality of oppression (Cohn 1962:1). Indeed, historically, “many of the outbursts of millenarianism took place against a background of disaster, plagues, devastating fires, recurrent long droughts... [or a] slump that caused widespread unemployment and poverty, calamitous wars” (Talmon 1966:181).¹⁵ These signs or crises serve to amplify the idea of the end of history and heighten a sense of imminence. People who see themselves in the Last Days become “semiotically aroused” and even small events or happenings can take on great significance: everything has meaning (Landes 2011:15). This is where the sense of *imminence* becomes important. According to Talmon (1966:167), imminent means “close at

¹⁴ Hamilton (2001:13) notes that some groups emphasise a prophetic or messianic figure, some groups are characterised by intense emotions and some are marked by feelings of guilt or inadequacy. Lastly, some groups reject the “prevailing” way of life and members may even quit jobs or cease to provide for themselves and their families.

¹⁵ With reference to China specifically, Deng (1998:57) notes that “in China the change of the seasons or dramatic celestial events may trigger off apocalyptic fever” while Inouye (2010:20) describes how natural disaster has been common in Shandong historically.

hand” which we can understand as “within a person’s lifetime” or an even longer period (Landes 2011:29). Imminent does not necessarily mean within days or weeks, although it can (and has done) in certain cases. For believers, there does not have to be a specific predicted date on which the world will end although this does happen with regularity in some millenarian movements.¹⁶

Millenarian salvation is *total*: there is an expected complete transformation of the world in which social justice and peace will reign (Talmon 1966:166). Society will be completely transformed (Cohn 1962:32). The notion of *ultimate* relates to the idea that the end of history is irrevocable and leads to a final future. The hoped-for salvation within millenarianism is focussed on this world – *this-wordly*. The salvation is experienced in a renewed Earth and a new social order (Talmon 1966:167). Lastly, millenarian salvation is *collective*. It is enjoyed by the faithful *as a group* (Cohn 1962:308). However, I am arguing that it is the aspect of signs which are interpreted in such a way as to indicate the imminence of the Last Days which is central to Huanghaicheng Protestant responses.

Indeed, there have been countless religious groups or movements in China’s past which have been millenarian in their outlook. Medieval Buddhism had millenarian elements (Zürcher 1982), for example, and the White Lotus was clearly millenarian (Naquin 1981; ter Harr 1992). Varieties of Christianity in China in the last 150 years or so have also had millenarian tendencies with the Taiping being a prime example (Kilcourse 2016; Spence 1996). Scholars have drawn our attention to the attraction of millenarian ideas in Republican and war-torn China for Christians from a wide range of backgrounds (Bays 2012; Lian 2010). In contemporary China, the Church of Almighty God (*quannengshen jiaohui* 全能神教会 or Eastern Lightning *dongfang shandian* 东方闪电) clearly exhibits millenarian characteristics (Dunn 2015). This has been most salient in recent events surrounding the Mayan calendar (Kaiman 2012) and the murder of a woman in Shandong in 2014 allegedly by this group (Legal Daily 2015). Some scholars have noted the “intense millenarianism” of Pentecostal-style Christianity in recent years (Deng 1998; Deng 2011).

¹⁶ Kyle (1998:70) suggests that there are two broad approaches within millenarian thinking: the “scholarly” approach calculates when the end will be with reference to prophecies, scriptures and complex mathematical equations; the “popular” approach within millenarianism focuses on an apocalyptic mentality rather than trying to determine with accuracy when history will end.

Despite the emphasis in the scholarship on particular religious groups, millenarianism does not just concern identifiable religious *movements*, a point which Hamilton (2001) has convincingly argued. While accepting that particular groups or movements are often identifiable as millenarian, Hamilton (2001:13) suggests that millenarianism can be a “body of underground ideas and thought which circulates in a community” rather than a recognisable movement *per se*. This distinction is extremely important in the context which we are analysing. Hamilton continues, “such bodies of thought may have little or no impact upon collective or even individual actions but may stimulate and guide them should circumstances arise to promote this” (2001:13). Closely linked to this concept of a body of thought in a community is the manner in which current events and circumstances help to shape specific perceptions about the “End Times” (Cohn 1962:21). Other scholars such as Stearns (1996) have similarly argued that End Time or apocalyptic thinking lies dormant like a virus and is catalysed under particular social or cultural conditions. This is an important factor for us to consider in our discussion below. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is a recognisable millenarian *movement* within Protestantism in Huanghaicheng. I am arguing that an underground millenarian “body of thought” – that is, a set of beliefs – has been stimulated by outside events which are perceived as crises. The Zhejiang “Three Rectifications, One Demolition” Campaign plays a central role in this perception of crisis and could serve to stimulate or guide individual or collective millenarian action. It is this conceptual approach that I will apply to the context of popular Christian responses in Huanghaicheng to the Zhejiang church demolitions, cross removals and detentions of Protestant Christians. First, however, let me briefly introduce Huanghaicheng and the Three-Self-affiliated churches where I have been conducting research since 2009.

Huanghaicheng and the Three-Self-affiliated churches

Huanghaicheng has a history of Protestantism dating back to the early Protestant missionary era in the nineteenth century. My ethnographic research has focussed on eight congregations affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) as well as multiple “meeting points” and “small groups” spread across four city districts in Huanghaicheng. The eight main congregations vary in terms of how they were established. Several trace their history back to pre-1949 churches, several were formerly ‘house churches’ which decided to register

as they expanded and others were originally small TSPM-affiliated meeting points which expanded and became ‘churches’ in their own right.

Despite depictions in the literature of TSPM-affiliated congregations as being formalistic and dull, the churches in Huanghaicheng are anything but this and below the surface there is an effervescence in their religious activities. There are a range of historical Christian influences on beliefs and practices in Huanghaicheng. Besides the North American Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, British Baptists and Salvation Army, the China Inland Mission (influenced by particular Holiness Movement theologies) and the Seventh Day Adventists were also active in the city during the foreign missionary era. ‘Pentecostal-style’ revivals swept through northern China in the 1920s and 1930s impacting Huanghaicheng and stimulating the growth and development of what are often referred to as “indigenous denominations” including the Jesus Family (*Yesu jiating* 耶稣家庭), the Spiritual Gifts Church (*Ling'en hui* 灵恩会) and the Assembly Hall Churches (*Juhuisuo* 聚会所) based on Ni Tuosheng’s (“Watchman Nee”) teachings. The millenarian nature of these three indigenous denominations in particular, should not be ignored as Lian (2010:14) reminds us:

“popular millenarianism came to define the indigenous, largely sectarian, Christianity in the twentieth century...its diverse components shared a basic trait of mass eschatological religion: the vision of an impending catastrophic end of this world and the redemption of the spiritual elite who were privy to the messianic scheme.”

In fieldwork conducted prior to the start of the Campaign, I had already developed The role of the “miraculous” is important for Huanghaicheng believers. God speaks through dreams, and Christians can be agents of divine healing (including the exorcism of demons), perform miracles and speak in tongues. Inextricably linked with belief in the miraculous is “scriptural literalism” – the biblical narrative is generally taken literally (Percy 2001:29). Apart from accounts of the miraculous in the Bible the real return of Christ outlined in scripture is mentioned with some regularity in sermons and Bible studies.¹⁷ This return of Christ would bring about an end to the world as it is and usher in a new world in which believers will find salvation. This transformation of the world is *total* and will be marked by the reign of Christ who will bring about peace. Everything will be new for all eternity once history ends making the salvation *ultimate* – there will be no return to the corrupt, sinful and lawless way things

¹⁷ The discussions on the return of Christ did not engage with debates on the various views of millenarian theology (dispensational millennialism, historical millennialism or post-millennialism, for example).

are in the world as it is currently. Christ will renew the Earth and reign over a new social order. This reflects a *this-worldly* focus to salvation. Lastly, this salvation will be for all those who are faithful to the end and do not “fall away.” This salvation, then, is to be *collective*. There is then, a “body of underground ideas and thought” circulating in the Huanghaicheng Protestant community which aligns with four of the five core elements of millenarian belief. In this Protestant community, the return of Christ and the salvation that he will bring is *total*, *ultimate*, *this-worldly*, and *collective*. I argue that the events – or “signs” – in Zhejiang have catalysed or agitated ideas about the return of Christ which make it a more immediate or *imminent* concern.

Responses in Huanghaicheng

When I returned to conduct fieldwork in Huanghaicheng in the summer of 2014 and then in the winter of 2015, the Campaign in Zhejiang was often a central focus of discussions and interviews. Having previously conducted extensive ethnographic research in Huanghaicheng, it was clear that there was a definite shift in the outlook of some religious specialists and lay believers in their view of church-state interactions. Previously, they had had a generally positive view of how they could practice their religion in what they regarded as a relatively relaxed regulatory atmosphere. Now, there was a generally pessimistic view of how things would fair for (Protestant) Christianity and at the centre of this change was the ‘Three Rectifications, One Demolition’ Campaign.

Following the start of the Campaign in Zhejiang, in Huanghaicheng there was a growing sense of crisis in relation to the Campaign and what it signalled for Protestants and the church. This sense of crisis very clearly fits with the *imminent* nature of the ‘End Times’ in the millenarian framework and several key factors were interpreted as “signs,” indicating, I would argue, a degree of “semiotic arousal” (Landes 2011:15). Believers increasingly viewed the changing social conditions as indicative of End Time or apocalyptic thinking. During the weeks I spent there in the summer of 2014 and again in the winter of 2015, the Zhejiang situation constantly came up in conversation with lay believers and church leaders. People were aware of the (initially) internally-circulated official document which outlined the ‘Three Rectifications, One Demolition’ as a three-phase campaign. No one had read this document, however, and it became apparent quite quickly that most of what people claimed

to know about what was happening in Zhejiang was gleaned from social media platforms such as Weibo, Weixin and QQ messages as well as word-of-mouth from other Christians.¹⁸ One idea put forward was that there was an internal struggle within the CCP in Zhejiang and that the campaign was a fallout from this. This idea was suggested by quite a number of Christians I spoke to – both clergy and lay believers – demonstrating that they were trying to make sense of the politics of the campaign.

No one I spoke to denied that the campaign was targeting Christianity and there was a general consensus that the state was attacking Protestant Christianity in particular, despite admissions that Catholic churches were targeted in the Campaign as well. Participants in Huanghaicheng claimed that the seeming lack of response from the Central Government was evidence that the Central State was giving tacit approval to this attack on Protestantism. This idea that the Central Government approved the Campaign had intensified on my 2015 trip Huanghaicheng because the work of an “investigation team” (*xunshizu* 巡视组) sent from Beijing in 2014 to Zhejiang did not result in the end of the Campaign as some church leaders in Huanghaicheng had hoped when I interviewed them in 2014. There was some discussion amongst clergy and lay believers alike that if the Campaign was deemed “effective” then it would likely be rolled out in other provinces, or possibly even nationally. A number of clergy stated that the reasoning behind the Campaign was that Protestantism was “growing too rapidly” (*fazhande taikuaile* 发展的太快了) and the CCP or the state was “scared” (*haipa* 害怕) and so wanted to “kill the chicken to scare the monkeys” (*sha ji xia hou* 杀鸡吓猴) in an attempt to limit its growth.¹⁹ The idea that there was official documentation marking out a clear three-year timetable added to the narrative that this was a planned attempt by the state to curb the expansion of Protestantism, and by inference, an attempt to thwart God’s purposes and the work of “the faithful.”

However, what I found most striking was the claim that this was actually a form of “persecution” (*bipo* 逼迫) which was a sign of the beginning of a more significant, future persecution (*jianglaide bipo* 将来的逼迫) seemingly based on readings of the Book of

¹⁸ Several participants did send me links to photographs of demolished churches and short accounts of what was happening in several locations in Zhejiang but the content on these links was quickly removed and I am unable to provide any examples of material that they accessed at the time.

¹⁹ In fact, Feng Zhili 冯志礼, the chairperson of the Zhejiang Religious Affairs Bureau did make comments about (Protestant) Christianity growing too quickly (Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of Zhejiang Province 2014), but no reference was made to this by participants.

Revelations and other passages.²⁰ People did not refer to specific scripture references but did mention the Book of Revelations and the Letters to Timothy while at the same time using biblical language, indicating that their ideas were based on interpretations of the Bible. In the words of participants, this “persecution” was regarded as indicative of the “Last Days” and would only get worse. “Isn’t there supposed to be persecution in the end? Isn’t that what the Bible says?” (*zuihou bushi yinggai you bipo ma? shengjing bushi zheyang shuode ma?* 最后不是应该有逼迫吗？圣经不是那样说的吗？) asked one church elder. This is not simply discussion of an isolated incident which has been labelled as “persecution” but a linking together of this perceived persecution with the idea of the End Times and the biblical narrative. The evidence that this was actually “persecution” and not just simply a political campaign against illegal buildings were the reports that churches had been demolished (“possibly a hundred across the province” *quansheng keneng you yibaiduo ge* 全省可能有一百多个) and that “believers” (*xintu* 信徒) had been beaten, arrested and detained.

It was highly interesting to hear *how* people talked about this “persecution.” Quite a number of people made references to the Cultural Revolution and the “persecution” against believers which had taken place then. People claimed that “we have gone back to the past” (*women huidaoyiqian* 我们回到以前) since they believed that the state is using “Cultural Revolution tactics” (*wenge shiqi fangfa* 文革时期方法). It is especially interesting to note that people who had never in fact experienced the Cultural Revolution used this metaphor as though this was some kind of borrowing from a collective past. I think it would be tempting to argue that this language drawing on the Cultural Revolution is simply drawing on the past to make sense of current experience. However, we have already seen that Huanghaicheng Protestants framed the Campaign as persecution indicative of the Last Days. Lay believers and church leaders drew on their understandings of the End Times and interpreted the Campaign as being part of a persecution which indicated that Christ’s return was possibly closer than previously considered.

The idea that the Campaign in Zhejiang involved the mistreatment of clergy and lay believers who belonged to Three-Self-affiliated congregations also seemed to intensify

²⁰ Several verses in these books refer to the idea that believers “will be persecuted” (*shou pohai* 受迫害) [2 Timothy 3:12]; that there will be a future “persecution” or “hardship” (*ku ’nan* 苦难) [Revelation 2:10]; or that there will be a “tribulation” (*huannan* 患难) for believers [Revelation 7:14].

feelings of crisis and signalled that the Campaign was different from previous attempts to limit or crack down on “house churches.” This “persecution” was perceived as different from previous crackdowns because it was against Christianity in general. During earlier fieldwork, I found most clergy and lay believers sympathetic to churches and individual believers who did not belong to Three-Self-affiliated congregations and some clergy even used their position to offer some protection to non-registered churches. At the same time there was some acceptance that the state would seek to limit these congregations since they were not “legal” (*hefa* 合法). The TSPM was viewed as a “protective umbrella” (*baohu san* 保护伞) which the state did not try to interfere with too much. The fact that churches, clergy and lay believers associated with the TSPM were being attacked in the Zhejiang Campaign seemed to signal a significant change while one elderly pastor said that it was a real possibility that the Campaign could spread to other provinces. Believers in Huanghaicheng, then, interpreted this Campaign as “persecution” which they regarded as unprecedented in its attack on Christianity and was therefore indicative of the idea that the return of Christ was closer than previously articulated.

This sense of “persecution” was directly coupled with the perception that the CCP or the Chinese state was supporting other religious traditions in an attempt to stop or limit the spread of Protestantism. Protestantism was regarded as the one true religion, and other forms of religion were seen as human attempts for self-salvation. People pointed to evidence from events at the national level as well as at the local level in Huanghaicheng. On the national level, Xi Jinping was promoting “traditional Chinese values,”²¹ interpreted to mean that the CCP was employing “Classical Learning” (*guoxue* 国学), Buddhism, Daoism and popular religion to combat Protestant growth. People claimed that the “Central Government does not support Protestantism” (*Zhongyang zhengfu shi bu zhichi Jidujiao* 中央政府是不支持基督教). This was seen to be most recently demonstrated in the fact that Xi Jinping had met a “famous Taiwanese monk”²² in 2013 and in the often-repeated story that Xi Jinping had stated that China was a “Buddhist country” (*Fojiao guojia* 佛教国家) whilst on his tour of (predominantly Roman Catholic) Central America during the summer of 2014. The story

²¹ Although the previous Hu-Wen regime had also promoted “traditional Chinese values” as part of the construction of a “harmonious society” it seemed that participants regarded the Xi regime as more aggressive in this respect.

²² This was a reference to a meeting between Xi Jinping and Venerable Master Hsing Yun 星雲, the most senior monk in Taiwan in February, 2013 (Lim and Blanchard 2013).

told of how Xi had said in a major speech that, “Your country²³ is a Catholic country, but China is a Buddhist country” (*nimende guojia shi Tianzhujiao guojia danshi Zhongguo shi Fojiao guojia* 你们的国家是天主教国家但是中国是佛教国家). There were even rumours that Xi himself was a Buddhist or that the Communist Party Secretary of Zhejiang, Xia Baolong 夏宝龙, had very close ties with a “senior Buddhist Abbot”²⁴ hence his attack on Christianity. There is no evidence that Xi made such comments while in Central America, and in fact despite Xi’s apparent personal support for a Buddhist temple throughout his career²⁵ it is unlikely that the president of the PRC would claim that China is a Buddhist country. The reliability of these claims is secondary, however. The *idea* of Xi making such a statement does sound convincing if placed in the context of a belief that the Chinese state favours particular religious traditions over Christianity which is viewed as the true religion and the community of the faithful.

Huanghaicheng believers also cited examples of how the local state was supporting other religious traditions in order to combat Protestantism. Firstly, there had been an increase in Buddhist activity in the previous couple of years with the building of a new, expansive Buddhist temple in the suburbs of Huanghaicheng. In addition to this, the number of shops and wholesalers supplying Buddhist religious paraphernalia had increased in the city.²⁶ The largest local Daoist temple which had been utilised as a tourist attraction for many years had been taken over by the Folk Culture Office (*minsuwenhua bumen* 民俗文化部门) and Daoist priests now performed rituals there. Shrines dedicated to the God of Wealth (*caishen* 财神) had also been built in the grounds of this Daoist temple as well as in one of the city’s largest Buddhist temples. Colourful boards explained the relevance of the God of Wealth and outlined the god’s long history in China. In addition, a *Mazu* 妈祖 temple in Huanghaicheng had undergone extensive renovations in recent years and now large-scale celebrations were held on *Mazu*’s birthday. Thus, despite the fact that many Huanghaicheng Protestants would consider it taboo to enter a Buddhist, Daoist or other temple or shrine, news of changes was circulated between believers. The fact that for Protestants it was becoming increasingly

²³ No specific country was stated.

²⁴ No one was able to tell me which senior abbot this was.

²⁵ See Johnson (2017:216-225) for a discussion on how Xi was supportive of a local Buddhist temple while he was secretary of the Zhengding County (Hebei) Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

²⁶ I did see three new such shops in 2014 which had opened since my previous visit. Laliberté (2011), writing about the Hu-Wen administration, argues that the Chinese state actively supports Buddhism in order to achieve particular political goals.

difficult (or impossible, according to some) to get a “meeting-point license” (*juhuidian zheng* 聚会点证) or to “upgrade” from a “meeting-point” to a “church” (*tang* 堂) was perceived as further evidence that the state supported other religious traditions over and against Protestantism.²⁷ This, then, was one major factor which facilitated a sense of crisis and led believers to frame this in terms of persecution which they linked to the “Last Days.”

A second key factor which led to a sense of crisis for Huanghaicheng Protestants as a further sign that the “Last Days” were imminent was that of the environment. The quality of the air in Huanghaicheng had deteriorated quite significantly in the time between my previous visit in 2012 and my return in 2014. There were certainly days when it did feel somewhat “apocalyptic” due to the thick smog, dark skies and poor visibility.²⁸ Participants felt that environmental degradation was something very tangible and emphasised that it was a clear sign that the world was ready to be renewed. They made comments such as “The environment won’t get better” (*huanjing haobuliao* 环境好不了了) and questioned whether it was even possible they could continue to live in such conditions: “How can we even survive?” (*women zenme shengcun xiaqu*? 我们怎么生存下去?). It seemed that people had lost hope in China’s future to some extent and the smog clouds and polluted water sources throughout the city contributed to this thinking. The perception that environmental degradation had reached a point of no return added to the sense that Christ would *have* to return soon.

A third key element which contributed to a sense of crisis relates to particular understandings of how God works in the world. What was happening in Zhejiang was interpreted as God somehow “refining” the churches and that this was the beginning of a much bigger refining across China.²⁹ As with comments made when I conducted interviews in Zhejiang, participants in Huanghaicheng suggested that the church had not handled its relationship

²⁷ According to my own findings, it had been increasingly difficult to obtain approval to register new “religious activity venues” (*zongjiao huodong changsuo* 宗教活动场所) since 2008.

²⁸ Recent media reports on China’s environmental issues quoted some alarming figures; for example, it is estimated that 60% of China’s groundwater is polluted (Kaiman 2014). Other reports discuss a pending water crisis (Roberts 2014). The poor quality of China’s air is also frequently in the headlines (*The Economist* 2013). As of January 2014, air pollution in Beijing has risen over 20 times the WHO’s recommended level (*The Guardian* 2014; Sam, Luo and Wang 2015).

²⁹ This idea suggests that the source of evil in this situation is God, rather than a malevolent source such as evil spirits or the Devil. It is quite possible that this idea has its origins in grassroots religiosity. However, this does sound like understandings of spirituality belonging to Watchman Nee and the China Inland Mission. It is certainly possible that such grassroots ideas are derived from the ideas of the Assembly Hall Churches which were a significant denomination in Huanghaicheng before 1949. Thanks to Alex Chow for pointing this out.

with the state very well, and that there was more the church could do to improve its situation with regards to the state. Such an idea was put forward by both clergy and lay believers. This refining involved God “teaching a lesson” (*jiaoxun* 教训) to the Wenzhou churches. Much of this related to the idea that many churches in Wenzhou were too big and that some were trying to “outdo” one another. Some accused the churches of “showing off” (*xuanyao ziji* 炫耀自己). This clearly demonstrated that these churches were “unspiritual” (*bushuling* 不属灵) and needed to “repent” (*huigai* 悔改). Due to the pressures of the Campaign (read, “persecution” or “refining”), some believers who were weak would “fall away” and those who would persevere would be “true believers” thus emphasising that salvation was for “the faithful.” As one lay believer said, “When the persecution comes we’ll see how many people will leave” (*bipo laile, ni kan duoshao ren hui paole* 逼迫来了, 你看多少人会跑了). This persecution and the refining were regarded as signs that the return of Christ was close and that this was a necessary part of God’s will for Christians in China. This view was backed up by other “signs” which were also indicative of the “Last Days,” not least of which was the general moral decline in society and that things in China and other parts of the world were becoming “more and more chaotic” (*yuelaiyue luan* 越来越乱). The perceived increase in chaos and general lawlessness was a signal that Christ would return “soon” (*kuaile* 快了). It was this sense of *imminence* which was the most notable change in how Huanghaicheng Protestants positioned themselves.

The general overall response following on from this was far from extreme. There were no predictions, for example, of when the “last day” would actually be. People talked about the need to renew or expand efforts to “spread the gospel” 传福音 (*chuan fuyin*) and to pray for China and its leaders. However, there was an increase in concern for China’s future and people voiced their concerns of the real possibility that things may become very difficult for Christians. One Protestant businessman who was heavily involved in one of the churches in Huanghaicheng made the decision to leave Huanghaicheng to study at a seminary in North America, taking his family with him. We talked at length about how he had arrived at this decision and why he felt now was the time to do this. The factors discussed above were central to his decision to leave his business in someone else’s hands and put the family savings into “studying the Bible” 学习圣经 (*xuexi shengjing*). Despite the fact that Protestants in Huanghaicheng were not, for example, selling their ‘worldly’ possessions in

preparation for Christ's return, there was an intensity in the belief that the 'last days' were here and that the ongoing campaign in Zhejiang was a "sign of the times."

Conclusion

During the summer of 2014 and the winter of 2015, there did not appear to be a recognisable group or movement within the Huanghaicheng Protestant community which was identifiable as millenarian in the sense in which scholars have traditionally defined the term. However, our analysis has revealed that within the Protestant community there is a firm body of thought which incorporates an *imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, and collective* salvation which has been catalysed by a series of crises centring on the 'Three Rectifications, One Demolition' Campaign in Zhejiang. Protestants in Huanghaicheng were able to make sense of the reports of church demolitions, cross removals and arrests of believers by drawing on their understandings of the 'Last Days' from their interpretations of the biblical narrative. A sense of state-led persecution and a "refining" of the churches in Wenzhou which was regarded as something initiated by God helped to solidify the belief that the return of Christ was more imminent than people had previously considered and that they were really in the "Last Days." It is, however, difficult to predict where this catalysed millenarian belief might lead.

We see in this response in Huanghaicheng to events in a different province, the widespread effect of a localised state-led campaign. This widespread effect was primarily initiated by new technology and social media. While criticisms of the campaign were quickly erased from cyberspace, there was a constant stream of news about events in Zhejiang along with images of churches caught up in the campaign. In some respects, social media helped to facilitate understanding of how the campaign was progressing but at the same time, I think that because many of the reports were partial this created a sense of the Campaign being more violent or intense in Huanghaicheng than how it appeared on the ground in Zhejiang. This perhaps served to further stimulate a sense of serious persecution, unprecedented in the reform era. The fact that Protestants in Huanghaicheng were talking about a hundred churches having been demolished across Zhejiang province in 2014 when nearly a year later the highest reliable estimates were fifty demolitions is evidence of the way in which a lack of information actually fuelled speculation and possibly even fear.

It could well be the intention of the Chinese state to allow for the dissemination of information on the Campaign in Zhejiang in order to send a clear message to Christians in China that an uncurbed growth of Protestantism will not be tolerated.³⁰ There is the possibility that such a campaign could be carried out elsewhere. However, regardless of what the intentions of the ‘Three Rectifications, One Demolition’ Campaign actually were, it is possible that it may stir up more trouble for the state at the local level across China. As with popular Christianity in Huanghaicheng, popular Christianity in many parts of the Huadong region and other parts of China fuses scriptural literalism with the belief in an actual return of Christ along with an expectation of the miraculous. It is possible that what I have observed in Huanghaicheng could be happening in other locations and could result in an intensified millenarian outlook as various crises serve as catalysts to “stimulate and guide” these beliefs. Further developments connected to the Campaign may also serve to agitate Christianity at the grassroots. For example, Pastor Gu Yuese 顾约瑟 (“Joseph Gu”), leader of China’s largest Three-Self-affiliated megachurch and his wife Zhou Lianmei 周莲美, were arrested in January 2016, under allegations of corruption (Iyengar 2016).³¹ Gu had previously been openly critical of the cross removals. They have both since been released but remain under “residential surveillance” (Caballero 2016; Shepherd 2017). In addition, there are new requirements for churches in Zhejiang to install surveillance cameras (Yan 2017). It remains to be seen what the effects of these developments will be. One possible form of trouble for the state is the development of “breakaway” millenarian groups with an entrenched anti-state stance.

I would further suggest that this Campaign has had a negative impact on patriotic feelings within the Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng (and arguably elsewhere). In the past I have found many Protestants keen to present themselves as “good citizens” and supportive to a large extent of the (Central) government, as other scholars have also noted (see Vala 2009). It would certainly appear that in the last three years there has been a shift in the Huanghaicheng Protestant community and there is now an increased pessimism about the

³⁰ Amnesty International argued that the Campaign was not simply about demolishing illegal structures: “In Zhejiang province, a large-scale campaign against churches was carried out under the *pretext of rectifying structures with building code violations*. The authorities demolished churches and removed crosses and crucifixes” (Amnesty International 2015, emphasis mine).

³¹ This makes Gu the most senior (state-recognised) religious specialist to be arrested since the Cultural Revolution era.

current leadership. This pessimism has the potential to morph into a much more entrenched and resistant approach to the state which could lead to a breakdown in church-state relations.

Popular Protestant Christianity is in constant flux as it responds to challenges from the state, society and from within itself. The Chinese state's concerns about radical or extremist religious groups ("evil cults") seem to have encouraged an approach which tries to combat particular religious groups or movements but ignores the possibility that there can be a body of millenarian ideas which can be present in a community and which can be stimulated by external events. This is, of course, because the key focal point of religious policy is about "legitimate" (*zhengchang* 正常) practice (orthopraxy) as opposed to "correct" belief (orthodoxy). It is also of significance here that my research has focussed on *urban* popular Christianity and not the rural which is often regarded as the place where due to factors such as lack of education or poverty, the conditions are more suitable for millenarian ideas to take hold. This is an important point which studies of Protestantism have not considered. We shall have to wait to see what the long-term effects of this Campaign will be, but it is certainly feasible that it will agitate the effervescent nature of Chinese popular Christianity which in the past "fostered a new form of messianism in a country where millenarian movements have been one of the few possible ways to channel the aspirations and the discontent of the masses" (Lian 2010:16).

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